

Cold

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Forever Knight fanfiction

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Natalie swung her car into the space in front of Nick's loft and switched the engine off. Gathering together her purse and the brightly wrapped package that sat on the seat next to her, she stepped out into the frigid Toronto night, deciding that it wasn't worth it to shrug into her coat for the short time she'd be outside. Dawn was only an hour away.

She headed quickly, mindful of the ice and snow crunching underfoot, toward the stairwell door and the relative warmth of Nick's loft. God, but it was cold, she thought to herself, shivering as a large cloud of her breath trailed after her as she made her way to the loft. It had been a mistake not to put on her coat, she realized, intent on that fireplace in the loft.

There was a single light on, near the couch, she noticed as the lift door slid aside. She stepped into the loft. It wasn't much warmer in here, compared to outside, and Natalie shivered again. Setting the package down on the piano, she lifted her hands to her mouth and blew quickly on her icy fingers. It was obvious that Nick wasn't home, but she called his name out anyway, in the faint hopes that she was wrong. The silence ringing through the loft was her only answer. He'd had the night off from work, Natalie thought, disappointment flooding through her. Granted, she hadn't called to tell him she'd be by, but it was so close to dawn and she just assumed

Swallowing, Natalie rubbed her hands together briskly, trying not to think about how much colder she felt now, even though she was inside. Then she turned and left, headed back out into the night and into her

car where she cranked up the heater as high as it would go and threw her coat over her shoulders in an attempt to stop shivering.

At this early hour the streets were all but deserted, and she drove aimlessly for what seemed like a long time, before she found herself in a familiar part of town.

"No!" she told herself, sternly. "I'm not going to check up on him. I trust him."

But the Raven was just around the corner. It would be the task of only seconds to drive past, to see if . . .

She did it. And she hated herself for doing it, particularly when she saw the caddie parked illegally in front of the club. In response to her self-loathing she stomped on the accelerator and pulled away fast, part of her horrified at the thought that he might choose that particular moment to step out of the club and recognize her car.

Gripping the steering wheel tightly with both hands didn't help. Biting her lip didn't help either. A tear or two escaped her lashes to trickle down her cheeks. Angrily she brushed at them. She'd expected this, she admonished herself. That's why she'd driven here, to see for herself.

But it was still disappointing, she had to admit. And it was so close to dawn. He probably wasn't planning on going home, which given that this was the Raven, could mean a whole myriad of things she'd rather not think about right now . . .

Abruptly, she rolled down the window, letting the arctic air hit her full in the face, driving those thoughts from her mind. She breathed deeply and forced herself to go through a mental checklist of the work she had to do, and came up with a reasonably long list of forms and reports that needed to be completed, put on the computer, and filed. Never mind that she'd worked a 10 hour shift. Never mind that she was supposed to be taking the next couple of days off.

Never mind that it was Christmas, a time to spend with family and friends, not cooped up in a municipal place of death catching up on paperwork.

Her face and arms were numb by the time she'd pulled into her parking space at the morgue. Again she didn't bother with her coat, leaving it in the car, content to just dash to the door. The cold focused her, crystallized some part of her that was in turn able to shut out the other feelings that might crowd through her at any given moment, overwhelming her.

Tonight, the cold was easier to deal with than the disappointment and the loneliness. Tonight she needed the cold to freeze the tears on her face and the pain in her heart.

Tonight she was grateful for the cold.

* * * * *

If it hadn't been quite so gruesome, it would have looked almost festive. A couple of the interns and lab techs had insisted on

decorating the offices and doorways of some of the laboratories, and Natalie had been only too glad to let them. As a result, the door to her lab was framed in red and green tinsel and adorned with a Styrofoam rosey-cheeked Santa. They'd even set up a small tree with little red bulbs on the filing cabinet behind her desk.

The aftermath of the Christmas partly, held hours ago, was evident too, in the overflowing garbage cans resting in the hall outside each of the doors.

A container of egg nog was sitting in her fridge. Next to the latest samples from Nick, Natalie mused as she looked down at it. Next to that was a small platter of gourmet cookies that someone had brought and had insisted they couldn't take home.

Natalie tried not to think about those samples, and how her whole holiday was somehow summed up in the contents of her laboratory refrigerator.

When Richard had been alive, she'd be there by now. At this time of night she'd be sound asleep in the spare bedroom of their beautiful little house.

They'd get up in a few hours and she and Richard, since they both acknowledged that they worked too much and were always caught somewhat unprepared for the holidays, would head out to do their last minute shopping, braving the malls which were usually overflowing. Sarah, of course, always had her shopping done early, and so she and Amy would stay behind, getting things ready for tree trimming.

Natalie and Richard would head out and act like a couple of kids and do some much needed catching up. If there was snow on the ground, which there usually was, they'd get into a snow ball fight that she usually won. She'd always suspected it was because Richard would let her, but that never bothered her. They both enjoyed it, and the day gave them time to catch up, and talk about old times. There was always some sadness too. At some point, usually over lunch, or in the car heading back toward home, someone would bring up a long remembered Christmas from their childhood, and suddenly their parents, and the memory of all that had been lost would fill the silence around them.

Usually it was Natalie who broke that mood, pulling Richard into the present with some recent story of their joint antics, or to remind him of some funny thing Amy had said. It was a drill they were both familiar with, and they resolved themselves into its pattern easily and comfortably.

There were tears in her eyes again, and Natalie angrily brushed at them for the second time this evening, looking down at the samples she'd taken from Nick earlier. Cynthia's samples had rested there, she realized, in that exact same spot, the samples that had pointed to the identity and guilt of the man who had brutalized and murdered her. Natalie deliberately shut the door to the refrigerator, as if to shut out those thoughts, those images. She had to turn those off fast, for as sad as her memories of Richard often were, the weight of these, she knew, would overwhelm her.

She couldn't stay here, she realized. Not here, not where Cynthia's

body had been held while they searched for clues to convict the man they all knew had killed her. Not where Richard's victims had been brought after his murderous rampage. Not where Nick has risen from the dead and into her life . . .

For the first time in more time than she could remember this place, her laboratory, was no longer a refuge.

* * * * *

The sky was tinged slightly pink as she made her way outside again, stopping only long enough to grab her coat from her car. She didn't want to drive. She wanted to walk and think in the cold, the clear cold that, while it did not make everything that hurt go away, somehow drove it to another place that couldn't reach her, at least for the time being.

So she walked. The sidewalks were deserted, though city maintenance had been out with a vengeance most of the night and they were relatively clear of snow and ice. Can't have those last minute shoppers, just like the ones she and Richard had once been, slipping and sliding on their way to help the local economy that last little bit, she thought grimly. Hands thrust deep in her pockets, shoulders hunched against the brisk wind that would whip down the empty streets from time to time she walked for blocks, paying virtually no attention to her surroundings. At some point she vaguely remembered leaving that package at Nick's and while some part of her argued hotly that she should hurry over there and retrieve it, another larger part simply didn't care. It wasn't worth the effort, and going there and finding him still absent would only bring the hurt more sharply to the fore.

Her thoughts were filled with Nick, despite her best efforts to stop them. But somehow here, in the cold morning air they were easier to deal with. Those few horrible moments when she'd first learned that he'd been shot in the head. Her fear and desperation had not lain in the fact that he was dead, but in the fact that he would have to go away, leave this place. Leave her. And there was some part of her that was afraid that he had engineered this, that this life was simply becoming too difficult to bear and that it would be better to make a clean break. He had tried it once before, and there was a part of her that didn't trust him on that one anymore.

Then later in his apartment. Her own practicality and sense of caution had all but screamed at her to take things slow, but he'd had that look in his eyes, and his lips had been so soft, and there'd been so much care and wonder in the way he'd touched her, in the way he'd held her close. For a few moments she'd allowed herself to dream of what it would be like when they found to cure. The hurt when it had all come crashing down around her, the sight of his burned face, the bruising grip of his hands as he'd demanded the explanation she realized then she should have given him from the beginning, had been all but unbearable.

"Is this . . . is what I am the thing that makes you so sad?" he'd asked.

Her heart had answered that one, clearly and strongly, even as her mind, her voice had evaded the question. her heart had whispered. < Only that you never give me all of yourself. I can bear it. But there

is a part of you that always runs from me, runs back to what you are
. . . >

To Janette. To LaCroix, that malicious part of her mind that enjoyed torturing her with the knowledge whispered in her ear. She mourned that part of Nick, because she knew that it would always stand between them, even if she managed to find a cure.

There was a small church to her left, she realized, it's ringing bell drawing out her attention, and she briefly entertained ideas of going in, of going, of all things, to confession, something she hadn't done in years.

She'd have a hell of an earful to give the priest, she thought ruefully, a smile curving her lips slightly. Unfortunately not an option, she told herself. There was no one to help her exorcise her inner demons, she thought. If Don were here right now, he'd go out of his way to make her laugh, or smile. But like so many who had crossed her path, Don Schanke was dead. He'd gone up in a ball of fire one night for no good reason. Now there was only Nick, and he was certain she couldn't possibly be plagued by demons, at least not like the ones that tormented him. She shuddered suddenly, violently, as much from the memory of Nick's demons as her own personal horror over Don's fate.

She'd seen Nick vamped out before, but not like that, she thought, resuming her brisk pace through the streets. Never like that. Again his bruising grip, this time on her neck, her face. And the horrible sounds he made as he'd bared his teeth at her, the inhuman glow of his eyes.

She still didn't know how she'd managed to keep her head, and the memory of those few, dangerous moments still filled her with a horrible dread. The knowledge that Nick had not killed her did little to keep those feelings of terror at bay.

LaCroix had been there. Nick had gone to LaCroix for help in battling the demon that he thought had possessed him, she'd realized.

LaCroix and not her.

She hadn't believed it was a demon, and neither, she could tell, did LaCroix. But Nick believed it, as surely as he'd believed he'd had a setback. It wasn't the first such setback, and it wouldn't be the last.

But until Nick learned to trust her, and to stop trying *so* hard to protect her, each time they'd continue to lose far more ground than they gained. And she would lose some part of herself in the process.

How much could she afford to lose until there was nothing left?

* * * * *

It was almost noon before she began to tire, the hours of walking and the frigid air both taking their toll. Hours of aimless wandering and thinking had done nothing to improve her mood, and her slight frown turned into a sense of sadness as she realized she was standing

directly in front of a soup kitchen. It had been recently set up to serve the homeless population of Toronto, many of whom she'd seen keeping warm by sleeping on grates as she'd made her way through the city.

She had once commented, to Tracy Vetter of all people, that she felt all used up. There was a truth in that statement, moreso now than there had been at the time she'd made it, but Natalie hadn't really understood the extent of it until now. Here she was confronted with an open invitation to help, and all she could think about was how little she could do for them, how little she could really do for anyone, least of all Nick. She'd tried so hard to save Richard from an unjust fate and had condemned him to commit the very acts of madness and murder he had fought his whole life to protect society from. She'd fought to bring justice to the man who had killed Cynthia only to end up betraying and revealing another victim, another lost soul who had tried to bring justice to an unjust system, and one who ultimately became part of the problem.

Where do you begin to pick up the pieces of a life that has become twisted and warped beyond recognition? she asked herself. Where do you start to put the pieces that you've let scatter to god-knows-where back together again?

Where do you find the warmth when the only safe place is out in the cold?

(to be continued . . . ?)

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